



STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES

Old Meat

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Dear Abby—
I've resolved not to inform the authorities on her, my wife. But I write to you to ask whether I should inform *her* or not, my wife. And, in trying to come to a decision, I of course ask myself if I would want to know.

In the daylight, the answer is rational, and simple, and obvious: yes.

But in the night, lying in bed with her, I'm not so bold. Yet at the same time I have to suspect I have nothing to fear, really. Have we not been married already twelve years? Surely if she meant me harm, it would have happened well before now, yes?

And, though they're blameless in the sense that their intentions were innocent, still, some nights I curse our new pharmacy for even making me aware of my wife's condition. Better that I had just continued to sleep peacefully by her side, in my customary place instead of on the far side of the bed, away from the open window my wife

has always insisted upon. Supposedly my repositioning to the other side of the bed was to lower my antihistamine dosage, and make me more alert. But I would take as many pills as necessary, Abby, not to have begun lying awake well past my usual hour, when the medicine had usually pushed me into sleep.

My initial thought that first night, of course, lying there without my glasses, everything in the house asleep save me, so that whatever happened might happen like a dream, was that my German Shepherd had crawled up into bed with me. But then of course I remember that Fetch, my German Shepherd, had been buried for nearly half a century.

I closed my eyes, looked again.

On her new side of the bed, my wife's profile was outlined by the sodium glow from the street lights.

She was sleeping as soundly as always, rasp in, rasp out, her chest rising and falling—unlike mine, I might add.

It's possible I had forgotten in that moment how to breathe.

Rising up from her pillow was the long, slender muzzle of a greyhound, or a particularly sleek wolf.

When I could, and I make no claims to bravery here, Abby, but when I could, I lightly said her name, and her

breathing slowed instantly, almost before the whisper had passed my lips, and then her eyes rolled open, yellow and sickly and not hers at all, but—she’s always been a deep sleeper, see. Though her eyes were open, she saw nothing. It wasn’t her waking, but the animal.

I swallowed, and it was like thunder in my ears, and my knee as I repositioned it to roll out of bed clattered like sea shells in a muslin bag, so that, for the next twenty-eight minutes, I could only clutch what covers I still had and silently gulp air into my mouth, force it down my throat.

On the twenty-ninth minute, like a gift, her eyes closed again, resumed their darting beneath the lids, and the muzzle of which she wasn’t even aware retreated back into her shadowed face with a thick, wet, and reluctant creak, and she coughed in her chest then rolled over all at once, flinging her arm across me so that the tips of her fingers rattled against my side for all the world like claws. But they weren’t, Abby. They weren’t.

She was my wife of twelve years again, unaware of her transformation, and now I know this happens to her nearly every night, regardless of her mood, or the moon’s. The animal in her, what it does as she sleeps is taste the night air from the open window in a way no man or woman ever could. And for now, anyway, that seems to

be enough.

But will it always be, Abby?

Needless to say, she’s of course caught me watching her in a different way since that night, watching her at the stove, or tidying the living room, or talking on the phone as if the world and all its particulars are in place, but the answer I give when she asks about my newfound interest in her—and I hope this is real, not just self-preservation—is that I think I’m falling love with her all over again.

At the same time, however, I know that some part of the scent she takes in at night is mine, is me.

So my question, Abby, it’s not so much should I tell her—honestly, I don’t have the heart—my question is that, at my age, can this still count as love? Is the outward appearance enough, never mind the hidden motive, which is simply my base desire to live?

Again, in the daylight, my answer to this is of course an enthusiastic yes.

In the night, however, my wife’s snout rising from our pale green sheets, a purposeful growl emanating from her chest, my heart pounds in a different way altogether, one that has nothing to do with the sacrament of marriage. Specifically, it pounds in a way I fear is going to wake her.

Once the blood has stopped thrushing in my ears,

though, and I can hear our fake eggs popping on the stove under her spatula, the question I have to ask myself is would *she* tell *me*? If, say, during my mid-day nap, which of late threatens to take the whole day, if *I* were becoming something else and knew nothing about it, would she tell me, or would she pull the covers up a nudge higher?

The latter, I think.

Instead of telling me, instead of making me know what I didn't need to know, she would count her blessings that I was such a sound sleeper, and perhaps this is what marriage really is, right? Not love *because*, but love in *spite*.

Or, in my case, *until*, I know.

Until she wakes.

But, too, I'm seventy-three, Abby.

At this point it's a foregone conclusion that the end is near. I can feel it inside already, like a spill. The only unresolved portion of it is how. Meaning that . . . well, perhaps my wife's perfect teeth on my neck instead of a hospital monitor later, and a team of doctors leering over me, that might very well be the tenderest expression yet, the most intimate kiss possible.

All husbands and wives should love each other so, I think.

I count my blessings each morning, Abby, and pray

quietly in the night, and leave this as a record, in case I've been wrong.

For now, however, I'll believe in love, and check my hands for cuts each night before bed—my skin is so thin, now—and cover any open wounds with two band-aids in the shape of a cross, so as not to excite her senses any more than my nearness already may be doing.

I mean, there's a difference in loving your wife and suicide, right?

Please share this with your readers, if you think it suitable. As for me, I'm off to nap now, in preparation of night, and in hope of morning, always.

—'Old Meat,' Eugene, OR